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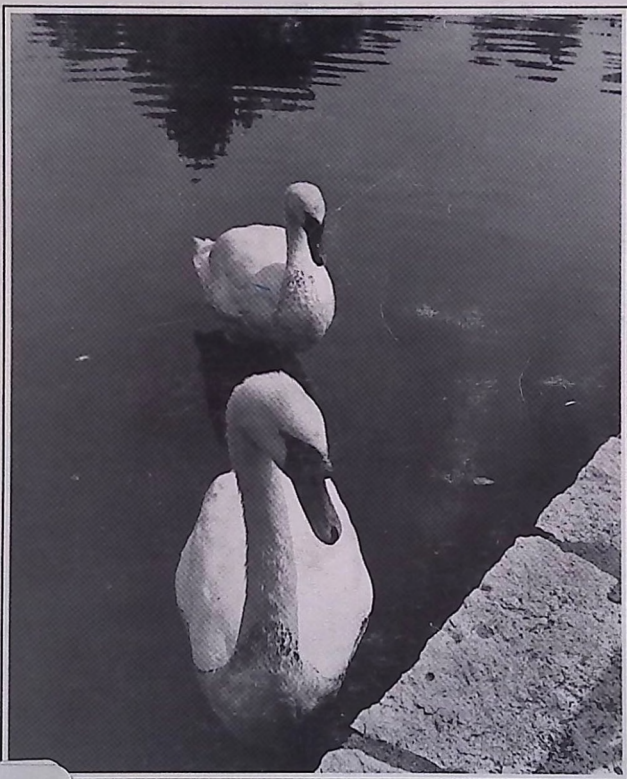
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# River Blossoms

Litmag 1991-1992



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1991-92

University of Missouri-St. Louis

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1991-92

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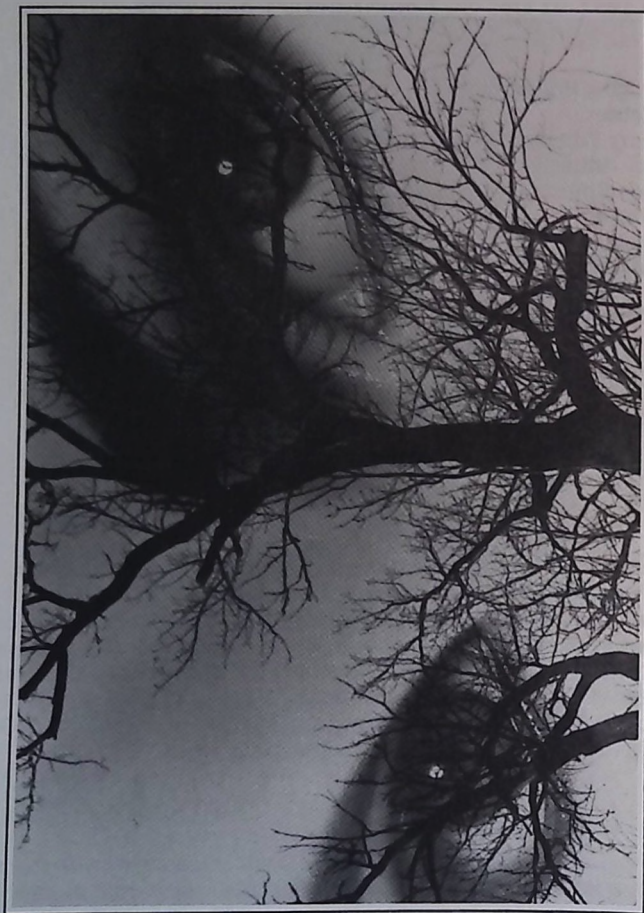
## **The 1991-92 UM-St. Louis Literary Magazine**

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<b>Treasurer</b>	<b>Elizabeth L. Jones</b>
<b>Literary Editor/SGA Representative</b>	<b>Scott Drost</b>
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	<b>Kevin McCameron</b>
	<b>Jean Simmons</b>
 <b>Production Editors</b>	 <b>Scott Drost</b>
	<b>Tim O'Brien</b>

\*\*\*

Submissions to Litmag are accepted from the students, faculty and staff of UM-St. Louis throughout the fall semester, and during the winter semester until February. Submissions may be placed in the Litmag mailboxes in either the English Department in Lucas Hall, or the Student Organization boxes in the University Center. Submissions may also be mailed to: LITMAG, C/O UM-St. Louis English Dept., 8001 Natural Bridge Rd., St. Louis, MO 63121-4499. Manuscripts cannot be returned.

Cover Photo: Paul Sudowski



*Diane Roche*



*Rochelle Kapnick*

*Before you start . . .*

Every editor should be allowed the self-indulgence of an editor's note, and with it the opportunity to thank the people who made the publication come together. First and foremost, the reason this publication improves each year (please disregard any personal bias) is the tremendous amount of submissions we receive. About seventy authors submitted over a total of two hundred pieces this year.

Special thanks also to Dave and Beth, who dealt with the red-tape details that make hippie English majors such as myself break out in hives. Kym Homyk, our Managing Editor at the beginning of the year, deserves special thanks; she got this whole thing off the ground before leaving us over the holidays.

Finally, the entire staff deserves thanks for putting the incredible amount of time and effort into reading and deciding on the overwhelming stack of submissions, and for putting up with the shape my apartment was in during all those Sunday reading sessions . . .

*Scott Drost*  
*Literary Editor*



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## Santa Fe Sky

An immense turquoise canvas  
stretched overhead  
splattered by  
downy explosions  
that punctuate  
the silent horizon  
and cast  
cool  
pliant shadows  
upon the  
parched  
grateful earth

*Mary Alice Bozzo Dultz*

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## And You Believed

Even after mother's milk turned sour  
you suckled deep,  
nuzzling indifferent breast  
preferring its cool flesh  
to father's searing words  
"Stupid child. That's all you deserve."

And you believed.

Soon after mother withdrew her breast  
you hungered deep,  
mewling rosebud mouth  
discovering the sugared  
promise of humor  
you licked hard  
down to empty calories  
and echoes of  
"Stupid child. That's all you deserve."

And you believed.

But that was years ago.  
Now no more winged lamps  
buzzing your head.  
No more indigestion  
heaped upon plates.  
No more big brother  
to teach you when to duck  
and where to find dessert.

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Just the hushed soles  
in the corridor  
and the fragrance of flowers  
and the pleasance of Musak  
to chase the hot volts  
you now suck down  
to help you decide to stay  
while rippling wall of white  
offers its starched protection  
against all you believed  
and all you didn't deserve.

*Mary Alice Bozzo Dultz*

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## Headstone

The mold is made at birth  
Empty for only an instant  
Knowledge and experience  
Flow into it  
Filtering through  
Senses and prejudices  
Blending with  
Joys and sorrows  
Seeping into each crevice  
Forming the marker  
Of a life

*Mike A. Vogt*

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## Slipping Away

streaks of red  
brighten the  
dusky evening

reminding me  
of the bloodshot eyes  
of my sick friend

and his  
dusky  
graying skin

like the day  
slipping off  
the edge  
of the earth

he is slipping  
from my life

*W. Carolyn Smith*



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## **blisters like pearls**

the grind of a chisel  
pounding violating  
the smooth tile  
plaster  
splinters  
and streaks  
white  
the world of labor  
fine shards  
needle  
tender skin

numb to all  
safety glasses  
happily contain  
violence  
residue falls  
coating  
furniture and  
walls  
trashed  
I sat  
questioning  
it all

*Kym Homyk*

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## The Stuntman

It's winter  
and I'm walking on water.  
No miracle,  
just wind-hardened pondsurface  
resisting my boots' metered onslaught.  
Each foot must be  
carefully  
planted  
and held in place  
on the gleaming green ice,  
and my thighs ache from effort

Ominous creaks  
make me slide my feet  
instead of lift them.  
Distribute the weight, distribute  
the weight through my mind  
of time and place frozen together,  
suspended by this cold snap.  
Bubble-filled sunbeam streaks  
lay trapped in the ice, yellow-green  
in green. They will finish their journey  
in Spring, long after I've completed mine  
of trust or danger-lust  
to the opposite side  
or the bottom.

*Scott Drost*

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## Red Like Tragic

firemen say  
sometimes  
that the brightness  
of a burning fire is  
from the trapped souls  
escaping life.

that's the way it was then,  
no one understood  
the glow,  
with the straw firemen  
and their red paper engines  
and the blaze on 42nd.

siren lights fluttering  
peppermint red  
like tragic.

*Robby Marquess*

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## beethoven

on the days  
when my shadow and I  
discuss my form,  
I like to stop  
and listen  
to the sick oil crows  
speaking poetry and nonsense  
from the arms of a tree  
"Beethoven," they say.

when the authorities know your name  
like a squashed, dead, opossum  
knows the weight of a car,  
and the red-stained road,  
the sun shines in  
tragedies and concertos.  
"Beethoven," it says.

when the living  
are sick to death  
of hearing gravestones ranting  
the names of the dead,  
they either fornicate  
or destroy.  
"Beethoven," a gravestone says.

*Robby Marquess*

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## The Chocolate Muse

Sometimes,  
I prowl through the corners  
Of the kitchen  
Searching for morsels of chocolate.

If I succeed  
I fill a plate  
With double chocolate cookies,  
And set it next to my typewriter.

Bite after bite,  
I lose myself in the lines  
From my sweetest muse.

*Elizabeth L. Jones*

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## Monday in April

As I lay, the slightly damp spring  
Grass taunts the back of my bare legs,  
Hands crossed casually behind my head, feeling the  
Surprising softness of my own hair.  
Above me, the sky spans, seemingly forever,  
Ebony bedclothes for Mother Earth.  
The Stars, flecks of white lint clinging  
Defiantly to its even surface.  
The Constellations, haphazardly arranged, to  
Confuse some, and inspire others.

In this eternal vastness I see  
My own thoughts, my own life.  
It belittles me.  
Yet in this most insignificant state,  
I realize how important one mind can be.  
I know that I can never feel  
Comfort more true than having the cool  
Evening breeze across my face,  
And the secrets of the Night in  
My soul.

*David Boucher*



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## Eulogy for a Living Man

*Let the Irish vessel lie  
Emptied of its poetry.*

—W. H. Auden

Why praise the empty pot,  
Let the words fall in deaf,  
Dead, and uncaring ears?  
Better, perhaps, to give  
The words to living man,  
And never mind the dead.  
Very well: some students  
Suppose that you are a grouch,  
A grumpy old man waiting  
For the College to give  
You a pension so you  
Can retire to Florida.  
"Don't call me Bill," you say,  
"You don't know me well enough."  
But I know well enough.  
Though you may look sixty,  
You are really eighteen,  
With a young man's joy for  
Young women and poetry.  
Your *Leaves of Grass* are not  
The rustling November straw.  
They are the shoots of March,  
Soft and tenderly yielding.  
You spin and spin, arms out  
Flat with the earth, dizzily  
Turning until the horizon  
Wobbles so fast that you  
Fall back into the soft  
Young grass under the rainless  
Spring sky, and then, giggling,  
Rise to turn and wobble  
And fall, laughing, again.

*Stephen M. Pentecost*

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## Waiting for the Arms of Jesus

Found spent, then bound in oaken cloak to cheat  
The paling cheek's gray bloom, to keep the bride  
From her only due, the Earth's own to mete.  
Entombed to wait alone for him, her guide  
Beyond the gloom, her willing, tardy groom,  
An eager offer saved for his consent.  
How else can she hope to escape the doom  
Of this digestive womb and just lament?  
Her kinfolk paid the man who dug with spade  
And pick, down where dogs dare not dig, where meek  
And beaten she would lie. Some of them prayed  
To him that she might find what she would seek.  
Others doubted the truth of this, his oath,  
Or questioned if she kept the tempted troth.

*Stephen M. Pentecost*

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## After Number 15 of Whitman's "Song of Myself"

The musician travels to the gig with his guitars,  
The children play and press their faces against the windows  
of the yellow bus on their way to school,  
The friend of the governor is identified by the numbered  
license on her Mercedes,  
The scrap metal and old appliances rattle precariously in  
the back of the trashpicker's ancient pickup truck,  
The three Roadway yard tractors accelerate in the breakdown  
lane and merge into the flow of traffic,  
The various vans, old and new, carry excited revelers to the  
baseball game, sleeping men in flannel shirts to the  
Chrysler plant, suited family men to their office jobs,  
The young father gingerly picks his way through the traffic,  
The mother sits in the back seat and comforts their  
daughter during her first car ride,  
The engineering tank is drawn on a flatbed trailer to the  
Army base where it will smash obstacles with its  
blunt cannon,  
The girls still their nerves on the way to the soccer game,  
The roadcrews are remembered in the yellow and white smear  
where a striping truck crashed,  
The highway patrolman glares through mirrored glasses at  
the driver of a U-Haul,  
The patrolman's dog sniffs the van as the driver proclaims  
his innocence,  
The Boy Scouts cram the back of the Suburban,  
The hurried driver of the Nissan has adorned her trunk with  
a stylized fish (symbol of a stylized faith?),  
The cars, shiny and dull, carry the vacationers to the  
airport, the students and teachers to the university,  
The executive's Lincoln drifts from lane to lane as he talks  
on the phone to his stockbroker and lawyer,  
The poor family moves by pickup truck,  
Thin twine secures their beds, couch, and kitchen chairs,

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The tractor trailers are everywhere, carrying the effects  
of the reassigned colonel, fresh broccoli for the city,  
rolls and rolls of toilet paper,  
One truck carries fifty live pigs and their pungent smell,  
The young black man drives a Cadillac (drug dealer, the  
passerby says, though he is probably a bank teller)  
The cross country travelers sleep in the back seat amid the  
litter of Trip-Tiks and Frito bags;  
The highway carries everyone everywhere all the time,  
And I spend my time there, too, in the company of my  
countrymen,  
In the company of youths driving their girlfriends to the  
park,  
Her hair blows in the open window,  
Rolled down to let in the early summer's air,  
In the company of old women driving their husbands home from  
the doctor,  
His empty gaze reflects in the closed window,  
Rolled up to hold out the winter's stiffening cold;  
In these things and these people I find the proper themes  
for poems and stories,  
Not in other, unknown things, unseen in the dusk's failing  
light,  
But in the imagined lives reflected in the windshields of  
travelers.

*Stephen M. Pentecost*

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## Untitled

wrapped in a soft blanket of words  
pulse trickles down the stream  
sleeping words won't come  
s's penetrate  
la la la la la la  
failure turns success  
square of sunlight marks white  
small talk from cats  
double vision  
too-weak doors  
pictures of a sudden past  
so many changes

foreign carpet feeling home  
words painting walls  
whatever you say  
becomes my world

*Chad Huddleston*

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**In memoriam: Julie Kerry**

Some called her Jules,  
And no other name  
would have fit her so well;  
For like a diamond,  
On all that she touched—  
No matter how hard the surface—  
She always left her mark.

*Kevin Hosty*



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## For Worse (A Marriage Vow)

The man sits,  
moon-rise at his back,  
amber fire clutched in beefy paws . . .  
Coal-button eyes follow me,  
his prey,  
beneath shaggy brows.  
His mouth, a jagged slash across his face,  
spits the curse,  
"Bitch."  
"Not tonight," I pray.  
"Oh, God."

Muscles ripple across his back,  
then bunch behind the  
mountain of his shoulder.  
Balled fists of iron swing,  
thudding heavily  
across my face.  
Stars explode inside my head,  
cartilage cracks,  
bone splinters.  
"Stop, they'll wake," I plead,  
"They'll hear."

Furious claws rip my clothes,  
and arms like nails pin my hands  
outstretched,  
exposing tender breasts  
to hungry teeth and  
fragile spirit to  
white-hot fangs of anger.  
I scream.  
The mother of his sons.

*Patty Fisher*

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## Nightsense

Listen to the moon next time it sings.

Join the chorus of the stars.

Hum the tune of the pitted orb

in cheesy harmony

as it pulls you into

the blue of night.

Feel the breath of rocks as they sigh.

Let your heart beat with

the rhythm of growing grass.

Your blood flows smooth, in syncopation

with night-jasmine.

Dance in the quiet of the

night's concerto.

Touch the sound the cricket's serenade.

Feel the heat of the

firefly's ballet.

Let your eyes listen to the

nightingale's trill, and

let your ears see the

whoosh-wamp flight of owls.

Drown in the music

of the night.

*Patty Fisher*

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## May You Never Be Rainy

She said  
And I flipped open her head  
And saw a garden inside  
Where roses and daffodils danced  
While daisies played on swings.

I tipped up the lid  
And saw a golden lake  
Of liquid fire.  
Cupping my hands,  
I drew some out  
And felt a warm tingling  
On my fingers and palms.

I poured it in my own lid,  
Full of murky sludge  
And felt the cold rain stop.

*Rachelle L. Olsson*

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## In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash

The shots rang out, ripping the eerie, expected silence. It took an eternity for the shotgun shells to fall from the warm chamber and bounce on the cold, white-tiled floor, where they lay exasperated. Pedro slowly sank down, slumping against the prophylactics and the birth control while firmly pressing the silent alarm button and grasping for the telephone to dial 911. The sirens sounded but the perpetrators had already fled the building with the cash and some food and liquor. Pedro was thoroughly thanked, but his new orifices relieved him of his life and about four-and-a-half pints of blood and vital tissue.

Mama Charleros stirred the soup she was making, for tonight was a special night. There was a celebration to be had. The telephone shattered the usual silence. "Oh, why isn't Pedro home yet? There is a party to get ready." But like mice and men, the soup would be dropped and the party called off. There is no joy in bean town today.

Pedro ain't makin' it to 21.

*Kevin McCameron*

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## Rise and Fall

In the middle of the night, in the center of the room, in the dark of my mind, there stands, a black hammering man. Bow bend task at hand, negroid features, coursing sweat, catching breaths between the rise and fall of hammer claps.

Tightening blistered nerves shocked with spikes of throbbing pain, that rises from the sledge, that can not break the chain that wraps around the rust-beaten box where I must drop, and lock and store the pain.

The pain that festers and breeds and grows, the tearless cries of a thousand woes, channels changed from the bellies of starving young, to promised things left undone, wings torn off butterflies, days ended with only sighs. Sighs of what could have been done, would have been done.

Or done in spite with eyebrows pursed, beneath a curse that escapes the edges of a chain-locked box, where the hammer drops. Storehouse of the hurt and pain that must be opened again and again, by this tired matted slaving black man.

Who then stands, with hammer in hand, head canted down, as I forcibly pound and pack and step on the face of that starving child. Shoving it past my mother's eyes the day I called her "bitch," and they cried, and said I love you...Pack it down.

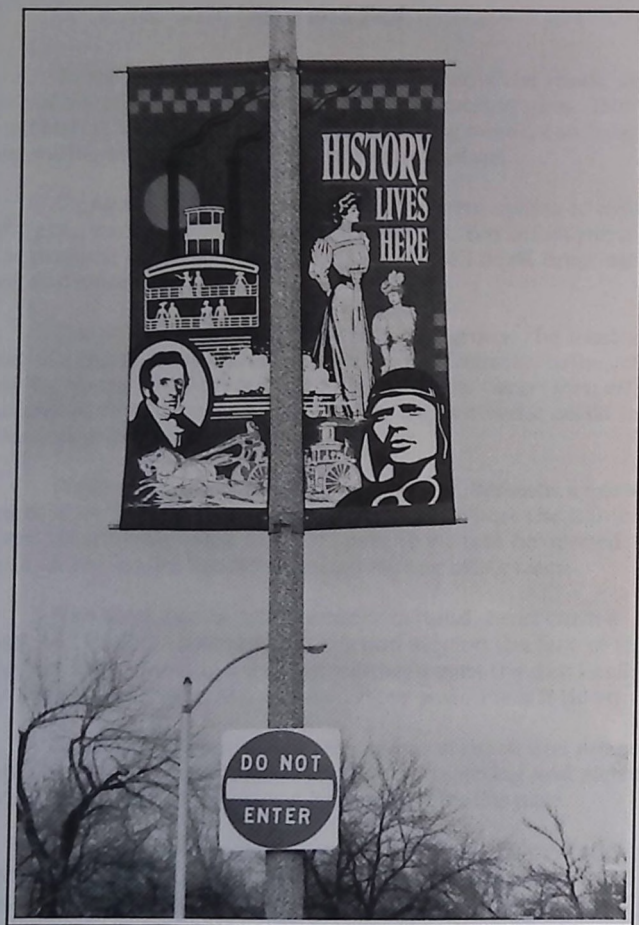
All this down, down, until the seams screech and space is made, between the spitting and crying and niggering and sighing, and sighing. Space to drop and lock and chain the pain.

Until space is needed again, and the black man stands, coursing with sweat, catching breaths, between the rise,...and fall,...of the hammer claps.

*David Estes*







*Rochelle Kapnick*



*Paul Sudowski*



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## The Creation

*Rosemarie E. Barron*

In the beginning Man created television. The reception was without form and fuzzy. Static was everywhere and in the static the spirit of Man moved.

Man said: "Let there be light," and there was light. Man saw that it was good and he separated the light from the darkness. Man called the light "white" and the darkness he called "black." Thus black came and white followed: the first day.

\*\*\*

Man said, "Let there be ABC, CBS and NBC and let them divide the attention of the viewers. Then Man made the new Fall line-up and he separated the "hits" above from the "bombs" below. Man called these heaven and cancellation. And then there were evening and morning: the second day.

\*\*\*

Man said: "Let all the hues of color under the heavens be gathered together in one place and let Tri-chromatic appear." And it was so; Man called this color television. And he said: "Let color television bring forth green grass, blue waters and skies, and trees bearing red fruit." Color television did so [for the most part] and Man saw that it was good. This was the third day.

\*\*\*

Man said: "Let there be satellites in the sky of heaven to beam continuous signals day and night. Let them be signs for a multitude of channels, for CNN and for HBO. Let them be for MTV for bringing music upon the Earth." And it was so, Man made two great movie channels; the tamer, Disney, to rule the day and the bolder, Playboy, to rule the night. He also made movie ratings and set them into the hands of The Censors, to rule over the day and night and to divide the subdued from the obscene. Man saw that it too was good. This was the the fourth day.

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Man said: "Let there be woofers and tweeters to bring forth the sounds of life and living." So Man created stereo television and every living creature was seen and heard. This stereo brought forth a rabble of rap and rock. He created stereo sound and saw that all was good.

He blessed the musicians and said: "Be fruitful and jam and fill the airwaves in the sky. Let country music also multiply on CMT [Country Music Television]." This was the the fifth day.

\*\*\*

Man said: "Let technology bring forth gismos of some kind so I don't have to get up off my fat duff." Technology did so, and Man saw that this was good. "Let us make this remote control in the image of our manhood—a phallic likeness—and let it have power over everything that moves across the wide-screen T.V." So Man created the remote in the likeness of his "manhood" and allowed Woman to view T.V. with him. Male and female sat beholding television.

He acknowledged Woman and said to her: "Be helpful and cook. Fill the refrigerator and have plenty of cold beer on hand."

"Behold, I have given you an adequate budget to clothe our children, fill our pantry, pay our bills and provide for my recreation. They shall be your duties. To every Woman of the Earth from creeping infancy to giving birth, I have given the elements of happiness." And to Woman, it was **NOT** so! Man saw everything that he had made and to him it was very good. This was the sixth day.

\*\*\*

The Heaven on Earth was finished and filled with preset channels. On the seventh day Man rested in his bed, exhausted from his work and all that he had made. Woman blessed the seventh day and made it a Holy day, because she also rested. Woman rested in front of the Tri-chromatic color television with stereo sound, dual picture and a multitude of channels; a Diet Coke in one hand and her own monogrammed remote control in the other. This was good!

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## Frog's Nightmare

*Rachelle L. Olsson*

"George, Georgie, George, George." A fair five-year-old girl danced around the room half singing, half shouting. She stopped directly beside the kitchen chair and gazed up at her eleven-year-old brother with her enormous green eyes. "Watcha doin', George?"

"I'm eatin' cereal. Now go away."

"Can I watch?" She stood tiptoe and leaned on the table.

"No," he pushed her back.

"George. Be nice to your sister." Christina watched her mom walk into the kitchen and look into the oven.

"But, Mom, she's bugging me. She's so hyper and she always follows me around."

She turned around and smiled at Christina. "That's just because she loves you so much. You're her big brother."

Christina grinned, wildly bobbing her head in assent. George sighed and shook his head. Then, with a sly smile, he looked at her and said, "Hey, Frog. Why don't you fix me a glass of soda."

"Okay, George." Christina began hopping to the kitchen cabinet, but her mother stopped her halfway by pressing her lips together and gently shaking her finger.

"Make him fix his own soda. You're not his slave."

Christina turned around and tried to stand like her mom. Shaking her finger furiously, she said, "Yeah, George. Fix your own soda."

"That's right." Her mom patted her on the head as she walked around her. "I'm going downstairs for a while to fold some laundry. I want you to be nice to your sister while I'm gone." She opened the door and started down the stairs. "And I don't want you eating any more. We're going to have supper soon," she yelled.

George looked at Christina again. "Where's my soda?"

"You heard Mom. I'm not your slave. Fix it yourself."

She saw George stare at the table until another sly look



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crossed his face. "I'll bet you can't fix a glass of soda in thirty seconds."

"Bet I can."

"No way."

"Watch me."

"Okay." George took off his watch and yelled "Go!" As Christina rushed around the kitchen, he chuckled and yelled "Hurry. Hurry." When she banged the glass on the table, George looked up from his watch. "Pretty good, Frog. I didn't think you could do it . . . You know, some chips would go pretty good with this."

"Mom said—"

"Oh, I'm not gonna ruin my supper. C'mon, Frog. Just climb up and get me some chips."

Christina turned the knob on the pantry door. "It's locked."

Christina had to drag a kitchen chair to the door to reach the bolt, which was there to keep them from snacking too much. The bottom of the pantry was one-and-a-half feet off the floor and the shelves were about two feet deep; just one foot less than the entire pantry depth. Christina stared into the dark recesses and shivered. She could imagine the terrible monsters that lurked back there. They were probably brown so they blended in with the wood shelves. They were big, too, even though there wasn't much space between the shelves. Monsters could scrunch their bodies to fit anywhere, but it was painful. It made them cranky and only too glad to sharpen their teeth on little girls' bones. Christina shuddered. She was lucky they never came out when the door was open. They were afraid of the light.

She reached up to the first shelf and pulled herself onto the base of the pantry. Once standing, she reached up to the top shelf and pulled herself up again to get a toehold on the first shelf. Since she couldn't stand up straight, she had to hold onto the top shelf with one hand while she grabbed the potato chips with the other. Once she had these, she jumped onto the base, then down to the floor.

George grabbed the bag and, after pouring a few chips onto a napkin, gave the bag back to Christina. "Don't forget to lock the door back up."

"I won't." She clambered back into the pantry.

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That Saturday, Christina and George lay in the den watching cartoons.

"George, can you hear me?" their mother yelled, walking into the room. She turned down the television and stood in front of the picture.

"Mom." George sat up, exasperated.

"Your Dad and I are going grocery shopping and I want you to watch Christina while we're gone."

"Aw, Mom. I was gonna ride up to the mall with Tim and Charlie."

"And spend all of your money on arcade games, I suppose."

George stared at the floor.

"You always waste your money . . . and your time. Look at yourself, sitting there, watching that stupid idiot box. You could be cleaning your room."

"On a Saturday?"

"That's the perfect time to do it. You don't have school and you don't have any homework."

"Yeah, right."

"All I'm asking you to do is watch your sister for a little while. You can do that, can't you? Don't you love her?"

Christina skipped around the room, singing, "George is gonna watch me. George is gonna watch me."

"Yes." Her mother bent over and kissed Christina on the forehead. "Now you be good for him."

"Yes, ma'am." She sat down in front of the television and smiled exuberantly at George's glaring face.

After their parents had left, George said slyly, "Hey, Frog. Why don't you get me some chips down from the pantry."

"Okay." She jumped up and ran to the pantry, unbolted the door, and climbed onto the base as she had done before. She was just reaching for the chips when she felt the door slam her into total darkness. "George?" She dropped to the bottom and heard the bolt click. "George?" She whirled around in fear and shook the door wildly.

Panicking, she began to scream, "George! Let me out, George!" She banged her fists against the cold, metal spice racks

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on the door. Then, under her screams, she heard a sound. She stopped for a minute to find out what it was.

"Ha ha ha ha ha." George was laughing. He actually thought it was funny. Tears streamed down her face.

"It's no good to scream. Mom and Dad can't hear you."

"George, let me out. Please. I'll be good. I promise."

"Too bad." The floor creaked as he moved away.

"George? George?"

Nothing.

Christina swallowed hard as she slid down against the wall. Her throat was sore from screaming and crying. Her hands were still throbbing from banging them on the metal racks. She rubbed them as she peered into the darkness. At least in bed at night, she could pull her covers over her head to keep the dark at bay. Here there was no protection. It surrounded her. As she sat there, her mind formed pictures worse than the cranky brown monsters she used to fear. Utter black evil swirled shapeless in her mind. She couldn't picture the kind of horrors that hid in this dark unknown. She cowered close to the door, eyes tightly closed, trying to forget the darkness was there.

"Enjoying the starlight, Chris?"

"What?" Christina shook her head to get rid of her nightmarish memories.

"Did I scare you?" the tall, blonde man smiled. "Sorry." He leaned against the balcony railing and held a glass out to her. "Here's your wine."

She frowned at the glass. "I asked for a soda, Phil. You know I can't handle more than one glass of wine."

"I know, but the bottle was almost empty. It won't hurt you." He took a healthy swig of his own wine and smiled slyly at her. "Want to go inside?"

"Sure," she sighed quietly.

As he slid open the door, she poured her wine onto the bricks of the building.

"Let's sit on the couch and watch TV for a while."

"Okay," she glanced into the kitchen, not surprised to see a half-full bottle of wine on the counter.

"Mm, baby," Phil moaned as he kissed her on her neck and ear and slid his hand up her shirt.

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Christina pulled away. "I really don't feel like this tonight, Phil."

"Sure you do. C'mon, baby. You know you want me," Phil reached up her shirt again and began to caress her breasts. Christina protested, pulling his arm down.

"So, I've got to warm you up." He reached up again and again. Soon, she could barely move his hand at all, so she decided to give up. "That's right, baby." Phil's lips enveloped hers and she forced herself to kiss him back.

When she was half undressed, Phil whispered breathlessly, "Let's go to my bedroom."

"Okay," she said quietly. She let her mind slip into emptiness so she wouldn't feel anything.

As he led her back, she felt a familiar helplessness and heard a voice from her childhood yell enticingly, "Frog."

She was Little Christina again, cowering under the bed, knowing what the tone of George's voice meant.

"Frog. C'mere, Frog. I won't hurt you."

She peeped her head out through the covers and yelled, "You're going to lock me in the pantry," then quickly popped her head in again.

"No, I'm not. I promise."

She peeped out again. "You promised before and I got there and you locked me in. I'm not goin' anywhere."

"Either you come here or I'm coming to get you."

Christina silently stared at the ruffles on her bedspread.

"All right."

She could hear his heavy footsteps moving through the hallway and into her bedroom. He lifted the covers, and looked under the bed. "Well, are you gonna come or am I gonna have to drag you?"

"I'm not goin' in the pantry."

"Okay." He grabbed her ankles and pulled her out from under the bed. She threw her arms around the baseboard of the bed and held on as tightly as she could.

"C'mon, Frog. Let go." George yanked as hard as he could on her legs, but Christina held on.

"No. No. No."

He dropped her legs to pry her arms free and she kicked

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out wildly but ineffectually. He grabbed her ankles again, but this time jerked her quickly out of reach of the bed. She squirmed as much as she could and grabbed at every doorframe she passed as he dragged her down the hallway. Every time she caught one, George laughed and quickly pulled her free of it. With every step, her hair yanked back from her head and her shirt rode up, letting the rough carpet burn her back. She tried to sit up to pull her shirt down, but with every yank she fell backwards, banging her head on the floor. "Okay, Okay," she sobbed. "Let me down. I'll walk."

George abruptly dropped her legs. "No more trouble," he warned.

"Okay," she whimpered as she pulled her shirt down over her throbbing back.

"And remember, if you tell Mom and Dad, I'll beat you up."

"I know." She walked to the open pantry, climbed in, and pulled the door closed. With her eyes shut and her knees pulled close to her body, she heard the bolt click.

"Oh, baby. That was great." Phil collapsed beside her on the bed and pulled her head onto his chest, caressing her hair until he fell asleep. Christina rested on his body, repelled, but needing the warmth it gave her.

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## Hand Picked

*Anene M. Tressler-Hauschultz*

Inside, the house was quiet and cool and smelled of fresh paint. Helen Abrams sat alone on the floor of the dining room, surrounded by the last of the packing boxes. Rising to her knees, she pulled a box to her and drew a silver steak knife down the length of its seam. She made an almost invisible slice in the clear sealing tape so that it still appeared intact. Pressing down on the box top, she forced her fingers into the unseen split and pulled the flaps apart. She worked in silence as she unwrapped the contents and pulled the last item from inside; then she carefully unwrapped the newsprint which had been wound round and round it like a bandage.

When the last of the coil was pulled away, she was left with an envelope: unsealed, slightly dirty, stuffed with papers. As she opened it, a narrow strip of paper fluttered to the floor. Helen picked it up and saw that the strip was a series of four machine photographs of her mother. In the top three pictures, her mother faced left, then right, then straight ahead. In the fourth picture, she looked beyond the camera, chin raised. She wore a dark jacket with a rounded white collar. Her face was thin, sombre. The pictures had been taken shortly after her mother's release from prison.

Helen remembered that she had clipped the bottom photograph and carried it in her wallet when she was still in school. But then she had learned about the prison, and the large, dark eyes and raised chin had become too sad for her, so she had taped the photograph back to the other three. She fingered the thin strip of tape—slightly raised, like a scar—across the back of the photographs.

Inside the envelope, she found receipts for several payments on her college loan, two license plate renewals from the 1970s, and a blood donor card from the American Red Cross. *Your donation helps save lives* and *Your blood type is \_ \_ \_* were printed in red ink across the card. *A Positive* had been typed on the dotted line.



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She unfolded a sharply creased sheet of paper. *Women's Health, Inc.* was printed in script across the top of the page. Typed halfway down were the words, *Termination of Pregnancy*. In a pale blue column to the right: *Three hundred dollars*. Helen rocked back onto her calves and studied the paper.

The sound of the doorbell broke the silence. Startled, she stuffed the papers back into the envelope, then tossed them into the box and piled wadded newsprint on top.

Outside, a large blonde woman stood like a soldier on the porch. She was peering into the sidelight by the door but looked away when she saw Helen approach. Her feet were spread slightly apart and she held her right arm behind her back. In her left hand, she held an orange and a grapefruit.

Oh Christ, thought Helen, it's another housewife welcoming me to the neighborhood. The hot afternoon air pressed down heavily when she opened the door.

The blonde woman gazed at something just above Helen's head. She began speaking at once. Her tone was low and reminded Helen of the muttering of old men on street corners.

"What I have here is tree-ripened fruit," she said. Her hair had been bleached and was the color of straw. She wore white cotton pants and a sleeveless t-shirt. She was tall, perhaps six feet, large-boned and muscular. Lavender and pink eye shadow was drawn in angry strokes from her brows, turning upward at the outer corners of her eyes.

At first Helen was so absorbed by the woman's appearance that she couldn't quite follow the low, steady muttering. Is this a neighbor? And what a strange offering. She's bringing me two pieces of fruit.

"Have you ever had tree-ripened fruit?" the blonde demanded. As she spoke, Helen realized that the woman bore a thick scar at the base of her throat. A thin line in the center, its edges were angry and overgrown, like a burn. When she spoke, it seemed to recede into her neck, and turn a dusty purple.

Helen heard children calling to one another in the distance and looked past the woman into the street, but the street was hot and empty in the afternoon sun.

Where are they? she wondered.

"I said, have you ever had tree-ripened fruit?"

Helen returned her attention to the woman. "Yes," she

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offered. "Yes, I have."

A short, broad knife blade glinted in the blonde woman's hand. She had brought it from behind her back with a swift, silent motion.

Helen thought the woman had moved closer. She fought the panic rising inside. If she just doesn't think I'm afraid, it will be alright.

"This is really a bad time for me. I'm very busy."

The blonde looked at the space above Helen's head.

"I'm expecting a long-distance call at any moment." She wondered why she hadn't come to the door holding the portable phone. That would have been more believable. She wouldn't think I was afraid.

"This won't take very long," answered the woman. It was the first time she had addressed Helen directly and it was somehow more terrible than the muttered incantation of earlier.

"And if you get the call," she paused, "you can go in and answer it."

The woman did not look at Helen. Her tone was hypnotic. Firm. Threatening. Yet, strangely reassuring.

"This really isn't a good time for me." She tried to sound casual. "Maybe you could come some other time."

"We go to thirty-eight states and we won't be back for a year. I have to talk to you now."

Now staring steadily into Helen's eyes, the blonde cut the grapefruit from navel to neck, then cut a wedge from one of the halves. The movement was noiseless. The blonde handed the wedge of grapefruit to Helen on the knife.

Without speaking, Helen tasted it, the warm juice filling her mouth.

The woman bent down and placed the grapefruit halves at Helen's feet. As she stood, she snapped a red, paisley bandana and wiped the juice from her fingers. The bandana had appeared so suddenly that Helen questioned whether the woman had produced the rag from her pocket or from mid-air.

Black magic, she thought. Then, trying to regain her nerve, No, not black magic. Prestidigitation. She's not selling fruit at all, it's some kind of magic act.

"We ripen our fruit on the tree and then, yes, it's coated with paraffin."

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How would I know that it had been coated with anything? What *on earth* is she talking about? Helen felt dizzy in the afternoon heat.

"You can keep it on the shelf at room temperature for sixty days, and then refrigerate it for another thirty."

As she spoke, the blonde woman sliced the orange in half and then cut a wedge from it, just as she had done with the grapefruit. She handed the dripping wedge to Helen, but this time Helen did not take it.

The blonde stared steadily at Helen but said nothing.

"Now the price on a case of this mixed fruit is forty-six dollars, the same as you'd pay in the store."

Helen felt a wave of relief. She couldn't buy the case of fruit. It was too much money. She realized she had an out, and with it came a renewed sense of strength.

"The truck is parked down the street. I'll bring you half a case."

Helen looked down the street in the direction that the woman had nodded, but her view was obscured by a row of hedges. She wanted to step farther onto the porch but stopped. No telling what this woman might do if my attention is diverted, she thought.

"We hand pick the fruit. You know, they stack the cases ten high so the bottom case gets crushed."

What on earth is she talking about? That makes no sense. And why is she telling this to me anyway? I don't care. I just want her to go away. She struggled to appear calm.

"No. I don't think so."

The blonde stared hard at her, saying nothing.

"Thank you, but I don't need any fruit."

The woman did not move. Helen wanted to repeat herself but could not bring herself to speak. She considered running into the house but calculated that she could never lock the door before the woman made it in. Then we would be in the house. Alone.

The blonde bent suddenly and placed the two orange halves at Helen's feet. As she stood, her fists were clenched.

"That's for you." She nodded toward the wounded fruit.

Helen backed into her house and watched through the sidelight as the woman passed the shrubs and disappeared. A line of icy sweat ran down her back. She was breathing hard. The house was growing dark.

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## Valentine's Day

*David M. Dickson*

Mario Verducci gradually awoke and recognized the hospital room that was becoming as familiar to him, though not as comforting, as his bedroom at home. His eyes slowly opened and the I.V. above his head came into focus, then the television mounted high next to the ceiling. Beyond the tent that his toes made in the blanket he could see fresh flowers. A strange mixture of smells came to him: roses, disinfectant, alcohol, sickness. He turned his head and saw his younger brother, Joseph, staring out the window. The pale light of early morning made him look younger than his 39 years. With long legs crossed and arms folded, he looked compacted, withdrawn.

"Good Morning, Joseph," said Mario softly. Joseph blinked a few times as if he had been daydreaming, turned his head toward Mario, and sighed deeply. He looked tired and older now from this angle. The light bathed the right side of his face, the left was in shadow. He cast a tired smile toward Mario and ran his fingers through his dark straight hair. "How ya feelin', Mario?"

"Right now I'm a bit hungry." He looked at the clock by the bed. "They should be bringing me something soon. How long have you been here?"

"Joseph looked puzzled for a moment, then shook his head. "I'm not sure. Couple of hours, I guess. That big nurse—"

"Brenda?"

"Yeah, Brenda. She let me come down early. I've just been waiting. You talk to the cardiologist? What's he sayin'?"

"Oh, he tries to be as positive as he can, but...you know. How about you? What is the lawyer saying?"

"His name's Franklin. I'm meeting him today at ten. I'll know more about what's happening then." Joseph sipped from a paper coffee cup. It was cold. He grimaced and set the cup on the window sill. He looked out into the distance at the arterial highway that pumped commuters into the heart of the city.

The mention of the lawyer cast a pall over Joseph's features, so Mario didn't pursue that line of conversation. They spoke now



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and then of inconsequential things, their conversation punctuated by long periods of silence in which both drifted into pensive-ness. At eight o'clock Brenda came in and took Mario's temperature, blood pressure, pulse—"Yes, you still have one"—and gave him four brightly colored pills to take. Joseph rose from his chair, grabbed his coat, and said he would be back after talking to the lawyer.

"Bring some good news," said Mario.

"Right," said Joseph.

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Joseph stood in the hallway outside the law office of Stephen Franklin with a cigarette held between two trembling fingers. A matronly woman, her hair in a gray bun, finally called him in. He stood in the short space between the secretary's desk and the door. The windowless room contained several file cabinets, tables stacked with papers, and a computer terminal for the secretary. There was a single picture on the far wall, a Currier and Ives print of a hunting scene.

Franklin came around a corner and beckoned Joseph into his narrow office. A single bookcase of legal volumes stood against one wall. Certificates and diplomas hung beside it. Franklin sat at his desk, backlit by the large window behind him. Joseph simply sat in the hard vinyl armchair provided and waited for Franklin to begin. The lawyer quickly got to the point. Joseph listened in rising alarm, then finally blurted, "You can't be serious. Can't you do something? Isn't there some loophole or...or technicality you can use?"

"I don't think so," said Franklin. "I've been looking closely at every aspect of the prosecutor's case and it looks airtight."

"What do ya mean? I see guys in the paper gettin' off all the time. And some of those guys did things a lot worse than I did. Do something, damn it."

"It's not as simple as that, Joe. If everyone could get off on a technicality no one would be in jail." Joseph looked shocked, stricken. After a moment the lawyer said, "All right, tell you what. Let's go over it all again. Maybe I missed something. Let's start at the beginning."

"Okay." Joseph Verducci took a deep, trembling breath and

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loosened his collar. "I was really hurtin' for money, and—"

"Why did you need the money?" asked Franklin.

Joe's face showed a pained expression. "Gambling, partly. And my car was about to be repossessed. Some credit cards. A lot of stuff."

Franklin nodded. "Sounds like you were living a bit beyond your means." Joe flashed him an irritated look. "Sorry. Go ahead."

"About two weeks before the robbery I met a guy at the track. Rudy Trujillo. We got to know each other a little. When he heard I needed money, he said he knew how we both could get some cash in a hurry. I was gettin' desperate and he knew it. Anyway, he said he had been watchin' a liquor store over on Belmont for about two weeks. It was a cinch to knock it over, he said. I didn't want to have anything to do with it. But then one night they came and took my car."

"Who took your car?"

"The finance company. I didn't have any way to get around. And when I couldn't get to work the next day, they fired me. I didn't know what to do. Two days later I finally called Rudy."

The lawyer didn't look up, but just kept nodding and taking notes.

"Rudy said he was waitin' for me to call. Said he knew I would eventually." Joe shook his head in disgust. "Rudy set it up for Friday night. Said they would have a lot of cash on a Friday. It was supposed to be so simple. All I had to do was drive the car, Rudy would rob the place." Joe paused. The gaze of his brown eyes drifted up to the white ceiling. His eyes moved back and forth as if he were seeing the scene all over again. Reliving it. He spoke softly. "I park in front of the liquor store and turn off the car lights, but I leave the car running. Rudy says 'I'll be right back' and smiles at me. I remember that. I'm really nervous. He's gone about four or five minutes, then I hear this popping noise. Just one shot. And suddenly Rudy is running to the car. He jumps in and says 'Hit it!' I drive like hell. Rudy is wild and laughin', and I'm screamin' at him, askin' what happened, did he shoot someone. Rudy says the guy pulled a shotgun on him, he had to shoot him. I'm so nervous I drive through a red light, and there's a cop right there." Joe seemed to return to the present. "I panicked. I tried to outrun him. I didn't know what else to do."



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Anyway, the police caught us , of course. But I didn't have anything to do with the shooting. I was in the car the whole time."

"That's not what Trujillo's saying. He says it was just the opposite."

"He's lying," shouted Joseph.

"I know," said the lawyer. "But Joe, it doesn't really make much difference. In this state just driving the getaway car makes you equally guilty of any crime committed by your partners. So either way, they've got you. I'm sorry, but I just don't see anything in what you told me that helps. And the police procedures, where we usually find the 'technicalities' you mentioned, seem completely in order." Joe simply stared at him. The lawyer pursed his lips and continued. "Joe, I talked to the Prosecutor, Greg Brimstone, this morning. He doesn't really want to deal with me on this. He knows he's got a good case and he's a real hard-ass. He says he might go with a guilty plea on murder-two, but you're looking at a minimum thirty year sentence, Joe." Joe's eye's widened in disbelief. The lawyer pushed on. We drew a real tough judge, too. Judge Michael Strong. Around the courthouse they call him Maximum Mike. You can guess why."

Joe was stunned. He got up to leave.

"Joe? Brimstone wants to know by tomorrow morning if we're going to plead it out."

Joe stopped at the door and turned, his trembling hand still on the brass doorknob. "What happens if I do?"

"We go before the judge and make the plea."

"Then they take me in right away?"

Franklin nodded.

Joe looked down at the scuffed wood floor. "I'll get back to you," he said.

Joseph found himself on the street below the lawyer's third floor office. Stunned by what Franklin had said, he could not remember making his way through the warren of corridors, or the elevator ride to the ground floor. At first he did not feel the cold breeze that brushed his face, only the icy wind that pierced his heart. He stood on the gray, cracked sidewalk for several moments then remembered the direction of the car he had borrowed from Mario.

The implications of what was happening to him came swirling

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into his head and he began to feel rising panic. He had to think, had to sort this all out somehow. How could this have happened? Everything was out of control. He felt the urge to run for it. Just run. But he knew he couldn't do that. Mario had put up his grocery store and home as collateral for the bond that allowed Joseph to remain free while awaiting trial. A desperate part of his mind told him that Mario was going to die anyway, but Joseph immediately dismissed it as an unworthy thought. Besides, there were Mario's two sons to think about. God, what a mess.

His mind in turmoil, he walked past his car and continued all the way to the riverfront. He climbed the littered stairs that spanned the muddy river. Joseph looked down into the swirling brown water. Trash and debris had caught on the pilings below. His eyes followed the path of the river upstream toward the dam that was being built several miles outside of town. The river jumped its banks several times a year flooding towns and great sections of low farmland. The dam was being built to control its waywardness. He turned, and with hands thrust into his pockets and collar turned against the harsh wind, walked back to the car and drove to the hospital.

Joseph walked into Mario's room and slumped into the chair by the window. Mario said hello, and when Joseph didn't reply, laid the book he was reading on his chest and waited. Joseph, after staring out the window for several moments, turned and cast a weak smile at his brother, then shook his head as if he couldn't speak for fear he might actually cry.

Mario finally broke the silence. He produced a wry grin and said, "You know, Joseph, I think that nurse, Brenda, has her eye on you. She asked about you again a while ago."

The tension broken somewhat, Joseph smiled ruefully and said, "Then she better be very patient. Looks like I'm going to be gone one hell of a long time." He went on to tell Mario in a halting voice everything the lawyer had said.

"Ah, Joseph, how could this have happened," said Mario. He shook his head sorrowfully. "What can I do?"

"You've done enough already," said Joseph. "I'm on my own now. I have to decide what to do next."

"What is there to decide?" asked Mario. "What can you do except what they tell you?"

"I don't know. But Mario, I can't go to prison. I can't live that

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way."

"Joseph, you are tougher than you think. You can adapt. Eventually you can. But if you really cannot adapt, then just endure it. What else can you do? What else can anybody do?"

Joseph looked at him in amazement. "Mario, I don't want to adapt. Even if I did I'd come out an old man. How can I live that way? That's not living that's existing. That's....it might as well be a death sentence for me." The thought came to him with a certainty that startled him.

A nurse knocked lightly and entered the room carrying a yellow plastic tray. She said hello to Mario and beamed a smile at Joseph, who only nodded. She tried to engage in light banter with Mario while extracting several glass vials of dark blood from his arm for tests. Mario gestured toward the departing nurse and said, "You should remember this, Joseph. Your blood is the same as mine, and as rare. If you ever need an operation you will need to store up some blood in advance. You should plan ahead."

Yeah, right, thought Joseph, plan ahead. It was perfectly in character for Mario to say something like that even in a situation like this. But what kind of plans do I need in prison? And what had all Mario's planning and hard work gotten him now? It can't get him a new heart. And unless he was very lucky he wasn't going to get one. The odds were against it.

Joseph looked appraisingly at his brother. What a piece of work. Always practical. Always thrifty. Always the hard worker. Joseph couldn't understand it. Mario seemed to have an amazing capacity to stoically accept his fate. This was true even after his wife, Maria, had died giving birth to their second son Michael. No matter what the magnitude of the disaster, he always just shouldered the burden and simply carried on. Mario led the kind of regular, orderly life that Joseph chafed under. He had tried many times to settle down like his brother, but sooner or later he found himself rebelling against the constraints such living imposed on him. His restlessness had cost him two marriages and countless girlfriends. He needed space. He needed freedom.

Mario's cardiologist arrived. He walked in carrying a brown clipboard that held Mario's medical chart. He pulled out a pen and began checking it over. "Hello, Mario. How are you feeling this afternoon?" he said.

"Well enough I suppose. I seem to tire so easily, though."

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And I seem to get weaker every day."

"Well, that's to be expected, I'm afraid."

Joseph spoke up. "How is the search going?" he asked.

The doctor shook his head. "All we can do at this point is wait for a donor heart to become available."

Joseph looked at his brother, gauging whether or not to ask the question they both wanted to know the answer to but were afraid to ask. He needed to know. "What are the odds that one will become available in time," he said.

The doctor cast a reproving look at Joseph, who stared grimly back at him. Mario was impassive; he just looked down at his folded hands and waited for the answer. The doctor thought for a moment as if to decide how honest to be, then folded his arms over the clipboard pressed to his chest. He looked directly at Mario. "You have a very rare blood type. It greatly limits the possibilities of acquiring a compatible donor heart."

Now Mario spoke up. "Are there others with my blood type awaiting a transplant?"

"Not right now."

Mario nodded. "You know doctor, I feel I am in such a strange situation here. I want to live as much as any man does, bit for me to continue to live, I must hope that someone else dies." He shook his head. "I have not yet received a heart, but already I feel guilty about it."

The doctor stepped closer to Mario's bedside. "Mario, you have nothing to feel guilty about. Try to remember that for many people donating an organ is their greatest possible parting gift. Others think of it as a kind of immortality. In that way you are actually helping them. But you should not feel guilty about it in any way. Only grateful perhaps." The doctor looked over at Joseph, who was deep in thought. "I'll stop by again before dinner. Try to rest as much as possible." He made a notation on Mario's chart, then turned and left..

After a long moment Joseph said, "Mario, aren't you afraid to die?"

Mario paused to consider. "Yes. Yes I am," he shrugged. "Who wouldn't be." He breathed heavily. "I'm afraid in a lot of ways. I'm afraid for my sons. I'm afraid everything I've been told about life after death will be false." Then he grinned and added, "And I'm also afraid it will be true." But Joseph didn't respond to

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Mario's attempt at humor.

Finally, Joseph said, "But Mario, isn't there a difference between living because you want to live, and living because you're afraid to die?"

Mario paused again. "Yes, I suppose there is." Joseph nodded and looked out the window again. Then Mario added, "But Joseph, I'm not afraid to live."

Joseph thought, but did not say, yeah, but you're not looking at a lifetime in a cage.

Joseph stayed with his brother until Mario fell asleep and then decided to get something to eat. He didn't want to meet anyone he knew, so he drove to an obscure part of town. Ordinarily, Joseph was a gregarious man, but since the trouble began he was more comfortable alone or with Mario. He stopped at an Italian restaurant called Sal's. He hung his overcoat on a wooden peg and sat with his back to a corner. He ran the fingers of one hand along the ridges of the exposed brick wall as he read the menu. The warm smells of garlic and hot bread came to him.

He decided to do it right; he would not get the chance again, and perhaps it would raise his spirits. He ordered an antipasto salad, lobster in a sweet cream sauce, and a bottle of dry white wine. After a slice of cheesecake and coffee, Joseph called for the bill and handed the waiter a credit card. Several minutes later the manager came to Joseph's table with a look of disdain, and in a tone used for the disreputable said, "I'm sorry, Sir, but the credit card company will not accept this card. You will have to pay in cash." Joseph, chagrined and frustrated, gave the man two twenties and left immediately.

He drove around town aimlessly, preoccupied with thoughts of prison. He tried to imagine a single day in that place from beginning to end. He saw himself being awakened by other noisy prisoners in the cellblock. There must be a continuous racket going on, he thought. Guys snoring, talking in their sleep, taking a crap. He saw his dingy gray prison cell, steel walls, toilet without a seat, two beds. His roommate. What would he be like? He would have to take whoever it was. He saw himself eating, sleeping, showering with the same brutal men all the time. No privacy whatsoever.

He tried not to think of the rape, the sodomy, and the other intrusions of body and soul that were bound to occur

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among violent men like Rudy Trujillo, but his mind betrayed him by producing unwanted details that horrified him. He could not imagine enduring hour after hour, day after day of this for thirty years, or twenty, or at all. His mouth suddenly dry, Joseph tried to swallow but couldn't. He shook his head to clear these too vivid images, then pulled over and parked in front of a tavern. He entered and quickly downed three scotches in succession. Thus anesthetized, Joseph decided to return to the hospital.

It was well past visiting hours when he arrived, but he was not stopped when he purposefully walked past the admission desk and took the elevator to Mario's floor. His footsteps echoed in the corridor as he approached the nurse's station. Brenda was about to leave for the night and was giving instructions to her replacement. She turned toward him and said, "Mr. Verducci, it's past visiting hours."

"I know," he replied simply.

She was about to tell him he would have to come back tomorrow but something in his dark eyes made her hesitate. "Tell you what," she said. "Go on in, but try not to wake him. He needs to rest. Are you okay, Joe?"

Yeah. I'm okay. Thanks." She watched him walk slowly down the long corridor to Mario's room. Joseph sat at the window and peered into the dark night. The room looked out onto a broad slope that ran to the outskirts of the city. He could see the lights of the office buildings downtown twinkling in the distance. He sat watching the lights for a long time thinking about the mess he had made of his life. He regretted so much. But now it was beyond changing. Too late. Starting tomorrow all his choices would be made for him. He began to feel as if he were in prison already. He couldn't run, didn't want to say, and couldn't make amends. He pondered these dark thoughts late into the night.

Eventually he decided to get a cup of coffee. He rode the elevator to the maternity ward and went to the waiting room vending machine. He burned his hand pulling the hot cup from the slot. He stuck his injured fingers in his mouth and winced.

He began to walk back to Mario's room but stopped at the glassed-in room that held the newborn babies. He looked in on the sleeping infants, each in a wheeled cart with an attached pink or blue ribbon and a sign that indicated each child's name and birth weight. He lingered there for a long time.

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He returned to Mario's room, sat, sipped the coffee and looked at his sleeping brother for a long time thinking about all that they had said earlier. And just before sunrise Joseph Verducci finally came to a decision. He rose from his chair, walked over to his sleeping brother and gently held Mario's cool fingers. "You're right Mario," he whispered. "The world belongs to those who can adapt and endure." He looked at his watch then and noticed that the date had changed. February 14. "I'll be damned," he said. Then, with jaw set, he turned and left the room. He walked past the nurse's station without a glance and left the building.

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"Mr. Verducci...Mr. Verducci, wake up." The doctor gently squeezed Mario's shoulder. "Mario, I have news." Awareness came slowly to Mario. Every day he roused more slowly from the depths of his black and dreamless sleep. Finally though, through some instinct of will, he forced his way back into the world of consciousness. "We have a heart for you, Mr. Verducci. It just became available."

Mario slowly blinked his gummy eyes. He wanted to rub them but couldn't because when he moved his arms the tubes hurt him. "A heart?" The doctor nodded but did not smile. "Where is Joseph. I must tell him. He'll be glad, and he needs some good news too."

The doctor and the nurse glanced at one another. The nurse started a sedative I.V. "He knows," said the doctor. "He can't be here, but he sends his love. We have to get ready now."

Mario felt confused. "Where is he?" But already he was getting sleepy again. "Everything will be okay, now," he said. "I'll be able to help him . . . help him . . . endure somehow."

As the gurney passed the nurse's station, the doctor paused to pick up a clipboard lying on the counter. He studied it for a moment and shook his head sadly. Then he looked off into infinity and began tapping the pen rhythmically against the clipboard.

"When should we tell him?" asked the nurse.

"I'm not sure," said the doctor. "Not now anyway. He'll figure it out soon enough. Let him deal with one heart problem at a time." He turned and walked toward the scrub room.

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## The Dock

*David Boucher*

The dock rocked pleasantly as Jake popped open a beer and dangled his toes in the warm, dark lake water. Both boats sloshed at times, in unison, under the corrugated fiberglass roof that covered the dual wells. The smell of algae was strong, but not overpowering. A breeze drifted across the water, coaxing Jake's senses into a state of relaxation that could only be obtained on a warm July night while vacationing at the Lake of the Ozarks.

Jake set down his beer and leaned back on his hands, feeling the peeling gray paint poking at his palms. He closed his eyes and inhaled, intoxicated by the aroma of summer. He grabbed his beer and held it high, toasting the atmosphere. "The romance of this moment is only slightly tainted by the absence of a female companion," he said, and he took a long pull from the can. After a satisfied belch, he shook his head and smiled at his lonely romantic blabbering.

The bloated moon was full, brilliant, and just surfacing over the trees on the opposite side of the lake. The silver light it cast was overpowered by the annoyingly yellow anti-bug light as it clicked on above Jake's head. He looked up the gradual hill at the back door of the lakehouse and saw a silhouette starting down the long concrete walkway that led to the dock. "Shit," Jake mumbled, "I don't need any company."

As the figure drew closer, it took the form of a young girl, sixteen, Jake knew, wearing a red v-neck T-shirt and a pair of tight white shorts. He felt anxious at her approach, but dismissed the feeling as being caused by something he ate. He looked away from the girl and up into the clear sky just as a shooting star burned across the horizon. He sipped his beer, accidentally spilling some on his cut-off denim shorts. Jake watched the drops melt into cool, dark spots on the material.

"Hi, Jake," the girl said as she padded barefoot down the dock, her long, brown hair swaying.

"Hullo," Jake said as he brushed invisible lint off his football jersey.

"Watcha doin'?"

Jake sighed. "I'm contemplating Einstein's Theory of

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Relativity."

"Huh?"

"Never mind, Julie."

Julie shrugged and proceeded to step gingerly into the 20-foot ski boat docked behind Jake. He looked over his shoulder at her. "What are you doing down here?" he asked. Julie landed on the floor of the boat and turned to answer him. The boat rocked violently and she pitched forward, catching herself on the side. Her shirt gaped open at the neck and Jake couldn't help staring at the girl's ample breasts. I should be arrested for even thinking about that, he thought. She's my sister best friend, for God's sake.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yeah," she replied, "Whadja ask before?"

"I said, 'What are you doing down here.'"

"Oh, your parents're using the stereo to play some weird music, and Heather's taking a nap so I figured I'd come use the boat's radio to play some tunes. You mind?"

Jake shook his head and tipped his beer high into the air, finishing it in one gulp. He heard Julie rummaging through a tape case, the click-clack of the cassettes pausing every so often as she read the labels.

Jake palmed another beer from his eight-can cooler and snapped it open. After taking a few swallows, he turned to Julie. "Want one?" he said, holding up an unopened can.

Julie wrinkled her small nose and squinted her bright green eyes. "No thanks," she said, "Beer tastes gross. You got any wine coolers?"

Jake chuckled. "Nope, I'm strictly a beer man," he said in a truck driver's voice.

Julie laughed. "You've only been twenty-one for a week. Don't give me that 'man' stuff."

"Oh, and I suppose since you can drive now, you consider yourself a 'woman'?"

Julie straightened up and grasped the boat's steering wheel. "Of course." She made car noises and turned the wheel back and forth. Jake smiled and he and Julie laughed together. He couldn't help liking Julie. She and his sister Heather had been friends for almost eight years, and in that time, he had seen them grow up along side each other. In a way, Julie was respon-

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sible for Jake and Heather getting closer. She was the first of Heather's friends not to treat him like a "big jerk" or "old guy". She talked to him as a friend. This made Heather see him as a person, not just a bothersome, overprotective brother.

Jake pulled his feet out of the water and spun around on his butt to face Julie. He leaned against a support pole that held up the dock's roof and took a swig of his beer. Julie had found a tape and was fast-forwarding to the song she wanted. As she sat in the driver's seat of the boat, Jake noticed how her light brown hair cascaded around her shoulders, and the way it flowed as she flicked her head to the side to remove stray locks from her face. He wondered why she had had only two dates since she had turned sixteen almost eight months before. In Jake's experience, girls that looked like Julie were usually engaged by eighteen, and never even looked at him. You had to latch on early in high school to get a chance. If only he were a couple of years younger.

Julie crossed her legs and turned up the volume on the radio. She leaned back in the seat with her hands behind her head. The first few notes of a well-known ballad drifted from the speakers. The song was by an older group and Jake knew every word. He stared at the label on his beer can and listened intently. Julie was listening also, and she glanced at Jake shyly. He was too engrossed reading about "Choicest Hops, Rice and Best Barley Malt" to notice her looking at him.

"Jake," she said, "Why'd you break up with Tammy?"

Jake blinked and looked up at her. "Hmm?"

"Why'd you and Tammy break up?"

"I don't know," he said distantly. "We just didn't get along." He rolled the can in his palms.

"Why not?"

"She was just too damn serious, I guess."

You mean she got too serious?"

"No, not at all. She just didn't take anything lightly. She couldn't joke around." Jake held the beer over the edge of the dock and poured it into the lake. Soon the foam blended with the green water.

"I see," Julie said.

Jake looked up from the water. "Why do you want to know?" he asked suspiciously.

"Just curious. You guys seemed to get along so good."

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"Yeah, right."

"Well I thought so."

Well you didn't see the rest of it," Jake said bitterly. He picked up particles of peeling paint from the dock and dropped them between the worn planks. After a few seconds, they floated into the open, where tiny bluegill pip-popped at them, mistaking the gray flecks for a meal.

Julie twirled a lock of hair in her fingers. "You can do better than her, anyway."

Jake snorted, still watching the lake. "Oh, yes," he said sarcastically, "I've got tons of women beating down my door just to catch a glimpse of my ravishing good looks."

Julie frowned. "Stop that."

"What?"

"Putting yourself down. You do it all the time."

"It's a habit. No, more like a reflex."

"Well, you oughta cut it out, whatever it is."

"It keeps me realistic. If I start to feel confident, Lord knows what might happen." Jake started to reach for another beer but decided against it.

"You might find a nice girl," Julie continued. "Maybe even fall in love."

Jake chortled and shook his head slowly. Julie straightened up in her seat. "What's so funny?"

"You," he said simply.

"What's wrong with believing in love?"

"Love is a myth created by lonely and desperate people. It doesn't exist," he said as if reciting a natural law.

"That's not true," Julie said, her lower lip protruding, almost in a pout, "You just haven't found it yet."

Jake swept his hand in front of him. "Look around you. How many people do you see in love. Real honest-to-goodness love?"

"Lots," Julie said, matter-of-factly. "John Willis and Kelley Jenkins—"

"Get serious," Jake said, "That's puppy love. Maybe not even that. It might be purely sexual." He leaned forward as Julie stared at him. "I don't expect you to understand, Julie."

Julie tried to hide the hurt in her voice. "Why not?"

"To understand how impossible love is, you need to have

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some experience, some hindsight."

"How do you know all of this?" she said angrily.

"Well, because—"

"You're Mr. Old-n-Wise and I'm a stupid little girl that's so far under you that you think I can't love somebody just cause I'm not old enough." Julie's lower lip quivered and tears welled up in her eyes. "I'll tell you something. I've got the same feelings as any 21-year-old and they can still be hurt when you talk down to me." She turned away from him and sniffed pitifully.

Jake's expression softened as he stepped carefully into the boat. He sat down on the ripped, green vinyl passenger's seat and ran his fingers through his short blonde hair. Seeing Julie cry because of something he had done made Jake feel worse than he would have thought possible. He couldn't bear the thought of having her angry at him. He couldn't, or refused to, figure out why. "Julie," he said softly, "I'm sorry. I . . . didn't mean to upset you." Jake studied the back of her long hair. He fought the urge to reach out and caress the soft strands. "Deep down I know you're right. Love does exist. Maybe not for someone like me, but for you. Someone who's fun, intelligent, caring and . . ." he hesitated, ". . . very beautiful."

Julie turned to face Jake. "Do you really think so?" she asked timidly.

"Yes."

Julie blushed and looked down at her soft hands folded in her lap. Jake reached out and gently brushed the hair away from her ear. He slowly caressed her soft cheek with the back of his hand and placed his index finger under her chin. Jake carefully tilted her face upward and looked into her sparkling eyes. As he leaned closer, she closed her eyes and parted her moist red lips. He closed his own eyes and anticipated the contact. This can't be happening, he thought.

"Hey, Julie," Heather's voice called from the lakehouse. Julie flinched and pulled away from Jake, leaving him in mid-pucker. "Get up here, we're gonna play Trivial Pursuit," Heather yelled.

"I thought she was sleeping," Jake said without opening his eyes.

"I . . . guess not," Julie stammered, "I . . . I'd better go."

"Wait . . ."

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Julie hopped out of the opposite side of the boat and jogged up the dock and sidewalk to the house. Jake watched her as she paused before entering and glanced back at him. The door shut behind her and she was gone.

Jake rubbed his face with his hands and let out a heavy sigh. "Another woman chased away by the Bubonic Jake," he said without humor.

As Jake clambered out of the boat to return to his seat on the edge of the dock, he couldn't help thinking about what might have happened. These thoughts stayed with him as he opened another beer and stared blankly at the lake. He and the beer sat there, untouched, until the sun spilled over the horizon.



*Robert Chaney*







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